

Bridging the Justice Gap Amid Growing Challenges

In response to funding challenges, Wisconsin's legal aid providers have formed the Civil Legal Aid Alliance of Wisconsin (CLAAW). This coalition unites providers, funders, and law firms in a shared mission of increasing resources for legal aid providers to bridge the justice gap in Wisconsin.

BY MEGAN E. LEE

As chair of the State Bar of Wisconsin's Legal Assistance Committee and an employee of a civil legal aid organization, I am excited to introduce a year-long column in *Wisconsin Lawyer* focused on the trends, challenges, and opportunities for Wisconsin's legal professionals to support access to justice. As civil legal aid providers in Wisconsin face critical funding and resource challenges, particularly in rural and underserved areas, Wisconsin's legal professionals play an invaluable role in stepping up for low-income Wisconsinites.

Wisconsin's Legal Aid Crisis

Wisconsin's civil legal aid organizations operate under significant constraints. Unlike neighboring states, Wisconsin allocates \$0 in general purpose revenue (GPR) funding to support these programs, and public spending for civil legal aid is limited to a federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families allocation. (Please see the accompanying chart.)

The lack of state funding leaves organizations reliant on federal grants, private donations, and volunteers to meet the overwhelming legal needs of low-income Wisconsin residents.

The prospect of further funding cuts is even more concerning when viewed in the context of rising costs. Over the past few years, the cost of essentials – housing, food, transportation, and health care – has skyrocketed, leaving many Wisconsin residents with even less disposable income to address unexpected legal issues. For legal aid organizations, these rising costs mean that every dollar of funding stretches less than it once did.

In practical terms, this means the gap between what legal aid organizations can provide

and what their clients need is widening. The cost of doing business has increased; office supplies, rent, technology, insurance, and staff salaries all reflect the broader inflationary pressures. Without significant increases in funding, legal aid organizations are forced to make tough choices, such as limiting the scope of services or serving fewer clients, even as demand for their help grows.

Potential federal funding cuts would further magnify this crisis, leaving low-income individuals and families with fewer resources to navigate life-altering legal challenges. Without immediate intervention and investment, the



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justice gap threatens to deepen, disproportionately affecting people who are already struggling the most.

In response to these funding challenges, Wisconsin’s legal aid providers have come together to form the Civil Legal Aid Alliance of Wisconsin (CLAAW). This coalition unites providers, funders, and law firms in a shared mission of increasing resources for legal aid providers to bridge the justice gap in Wisconsin. One of CLAAW’s key priorities is advocating for state funding. Advocacy for state funding is an uphill battle but securing consistent state support for legal aid is a crucial component of meeting the overwhelming need for legal help in Wisconsin.

Pro Bono Gaps and Geographic Disparities

Despite the hard work of legal aid organizations, gaps in pro bono participation remain a significant barrier. Rural

Midwest States’ 2019 Public Spending Amounts for Civil Legal Aid

State	General Purpose Revenue (GPR)/Public Funding
Minnesota	\$14,720,000
Michigan	\$6,477,000
Illinois	\$2,800,000
Iowa	\$2,634,601
Indiana	\$1,900,000
Wisconsin	\$0

Source: Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau Paper #110, Civil Legal Assistance (Administration – General Agency Provisions), https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/budget/2021_23_biennial_budget/302_budget_papers/110_administration_general_agency_provisions_civil_legal_assistance.pdf#:~:text=and%20take%20no%20action.%20The%20Foundation%20would,%0.10%20per%20capita%20on%20civil%20legal%20aid. **WL**

and northern Wisconsin communities face chronic shortages of attorneys, which translates to even fewer options in these areas for attorneys willing to do pro bono or low bono (discounted-rate) work. Even in urban areas such as Madison and Milwaukee, attorneys on pro bono panels take fewer cases or focus on shorter pro bono opportunities, rather than full representation, leaving organizations scrambling to place clients or forced to turn them away entirely.

It is particularly difficult to find attorneys to take family law cases. These cases can involve complicating dynamics of abuse, which increase the time, expertise, and emotional labor expected of the attorneys who take them on. Unfortunately, family law is also the area of greatest need.

A Numbers Problem

The scale of Wisconsin’s pro bono participation underscores the challenges faced by legal aid providers. In recent years, the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic has seen increased client demand and about half the usual number of volunteer lawyers.

In 2023, Wisconsin’s Legal Services Corporation (LSC)-funded programs

worked with 383 volunteer attorneys, representing just 2.28% of the more than 16,000 attorneys licensed in Wisconsin. Of those who do volunteer or take cases at a reduced rate, the average contribution is 27.55 hours annually, far below the aspirational 50 hours outlined in Wisconsin’s SCR 20:6.1.

Expanding pro bono and low bono participation is essential but requires significant investment of legal aid providers to administer these programs. Engaging more volunteers would increase the number of people helped but also would require additional staffing, training, and resources.

Coordinated Efforts

CLAAW, through its member organizations, is tackling these issues head-on. By pooling resources and presenting a unified voice, the coalition is building momentum for long-term solutions. One key focus is advocating for state GPR funding to stabilize and expand civil legal aid programs. Consistent funding would enable organizations to serve more clients, expand rural outreach, and provide the administrative infrastructure necessary to support expanded pro bono programs.

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Members of CLAAW are also playing a vital role in developing and managing a statewide legal help website, Wisconsin Law Help, to provide straightforward legal resources for people the organizations have to turn away. Realistically, countless people will be forced to navigate the legal system without legal representation. To increase their chances of a fair outcome, expanding and centralizing self-representation resources for civil cases is a step in the right direction.

How to Bridge the Gap

The legal profession in Wisconsin is at a crossroads. The challenges outlined here demand a multifaceted response, including the following:

- **Increased Pro Bono Engagement.**

Attorneys across the state, particularly in rural areas, must meet their professional responsibility under SCR 20:6.1.

- **Enhanced Funding.** Advocating for state-level GPR funding and safeguarding federal funding sources are crucial to sustaining civil legal aid.

- **Administrative Investment.** Expanding the capacity of legal aid organizations to support and manage pro bono volunteers is essential for long-term success.

- **Collaboration through CLAAW.** By working together, Wisconsin's legal aid

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providers, funders, and law firms can drive meaningful change.

- **A Year of Focus – Bridging the Justice Gap.** Throughout 2025, the Legal Assistance Committee is collaborating with *Wisconsin Lawyer* to explore these issues and solutions in greater depth. The legal profession

is evolving – join us in imagining a better future for the provision of legal services in Wisconsin.

Building the Path Forward

The formation of CLAAW, the work of Wisconsin's legal aid organizations, and the passion of Wisconsin's legal community provide a strong foundation for addressing these challenges. However, success will depend on the

active engagement of the state's legal community. Every attorney has a role to play in closing the justice gap. Together, we can ensure that every Wisconsinite has access to the legal help they need, regardless of their income or geography.

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We are excited to announce that the 2025 Wisconsin Solo & Small Firm Conference (WSSFC) will take place from **October 16-18, 2025**, at the beautiful Kalahari Resort!

Mark your calendars and join us for an inspiring 3 days filled with insightful sessions, expert speakers, and valuable networking opportunities. This is a fantastic chance to connect with fellow professionals and elevate your practice.

Stay tuned for more details as we get closer to the event.

We can't wait to see you there!

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